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WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2007

Navy Involvement in Conflicts Ashore

Dec. 21, 3:15 p.m.

CNO Adm. Michael Mullen addresses sailors deployed to ships at sea

One more helicopter ride and the CNO is aboard *USS Boxer*, an amphibious assault ship. Soon he's hosting a third all-hands call inside another immense hangar deck with hundreds of sailors. This time there is no raised platform on which to stand. So Mullen, with microphone, becomes a displaced voice to some of the sailors.

He strikes familiar major themes. His sailors raise new topics, some tied to the Navy's force drawdown its fourth year. Why not reinstitute the Cold War-era drawdown offer of early retirements? Not needed, Mullen says. How about a civilian-like 401k plan with government matching of sailor contributions? Also not needed, says the CNO. In fact, military compensation overall has been improved significantly in recent years.

"You're a very young guy," Mullen tells a sailor. "As time goes on you get older, the health care plan becomes more valuable. And right now the military health plan is the gold standard in this country at a time when all that is changing [in the private sector.] That plus the

retirement plan – if you stay to 20 years and draw retirement, it's as good as you'll get anywhere in the country."

Again, the issue turns to IA assignments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mullen and Campa assure *Boxer* sailors that augmentees no longer are getting IA orders only a couples days before they have to leave.

"We're averaging probably 60 days right now," Campa says. Again, Mullen defends Navy's expanding involvement in conflict ashore."I don't think we can be a Navy that just stays at sea and hopes it all goes well ashore. I think those days are over," he says. "And the days of big sea battles, at least certainly for the foreseeable future, are over. We've got a lot of capability, a lot of skills and we can make a difference."

Five or six of the Navy's best officers in the rank of commander are in charge of provisional reconstruction teams in Afghanistan, a primary tool for pacifying and modernizing that war-torn country.

Five hundred sailors are working ashore in the Horn of Africa supporting missions that, long term, should help the United States and its allies fight slavery, piracy, illicit drug trade and the threat posed by terrorists and potential weapons of mass destruction.

Those and 10,000 other sailors deployed as IAs will return from such assignments and "infect the Navy in a very positive way about what's going on in the world. And as they become more senior they will change the face of the Navy and how the Navy views the future."

By early evening, Mullen and his staff, and certainly this 55-year-old journalist, are wiped out. Some of us haven't slept since dawn on the 20th, more than 30 hours ago. The 60-year-old Mullen appears to set a relentless pace for himself and his people on trips like this. But our first day, spent at sea, also renews my appreciation for the inspiring combination of youth and professionalism found aboard Navy warships.

Showing purpose and confidence, whether operating the most sophisticated communications gear or just moving briskly through passageways, these young men and women, many only a year or two out of high school, exude a special commitment to their jobs and to their ship. That commitment seems to keep at bay the reality of being so far from family and the comforts of home.

A former surface warfare officer in our group, as we settle into a stateroom aboard *Boxer*, recalls with fondness his years at sea and the predictable rhythms aboard every ship. They flow, he suggests, from the engine noise and the daily activities of the crew, and they provide their own special comforts to those who love the life.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 01, 2007

Green Side/Blue Side

Dec. 22, 7:30 a.m.

We depart *USS Boxer* aboard two MH-60 Seahawk helicopters, flying high enough to stay above a thick layer of clouds stretching across the central Persian Gulf. We land 90 minutes later in sunshine at Ali Al Salem airport in Kuwait. Hardened aircraft hangars beside the runway still show damage from the 1991 Gulf War.

Vans take us to a small building where we are issued helmets and body armor. Returning to the tarmac, we stow the heavy gear and our carry bags in the rear of two Air Force C-12 propjets. The next leg of our trip is a two-hour flight into Al Taqaddum Air Base in central Iraq, 45 miles west of Baghdad. Marines call it Camp TQ.

Mullen exchanges salutes and handshakes. Major Gen. Richard Zilmer is commanding general of First Marine Expeditionary Brigade out of Camp Pendleton, Calif. He has been in charge of coalition forces in western Iraq since February 2006.

With the CNO off to a classified briefing, I follow MCPON Campa to a gathering of Navy chief petty officers. Most sailors assigned here are hospital corpsmen embedded with Marine combat units or Seabees working projects to enhance the safety and comfort of U.S. forces here in Anbar province, one of Iraq's more dangerous areas.

A dozen Navy chiefs wearing desert cammies congregate on a roof-top patio of the brigade headquarters building, their chairs in a semi-circle beneath camouflage netting. Campa stands before them, sharing some observations after five months as the CNO's top enlisted advisor. He emphasizes the importance of Chiefs' Mess leadership for the health of the Navy in the long war ahead. Before turning to the concerns of chiefs themselves, he asks what issues their sailors are likely to raise at the CNO's all hands call that afternoon.

One big concern is Mullen's recent decision to suspend advancement exams for sailors on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan. He made it after a photograph was distributed throughout the Navy, via the Internet, showing a sailor sitting on a rock, possibly on watch, weapon at the ready, taking his advancement exam. Campa asks the chiefs if they have seen it. Most have.

"I don't know what bonehead sent that out but someone did ... with the story of the lengths people are going to give exams. But to have someone sitting on a rock doing that -- if there was a chief anywhere in that area he should have been shot," Campa says.

With exams now suspended, the concern among sailors eligible to compete for advancement is that they will fall behind peers as a consequence of a war zone assignment.

"You're saying your sailors want to take the exam here?" Campa asks, his eyes moving from chief to chief.

Yes, they say, or they nod in agreement.

"You need to tell that to the CNO when you bring that up at the all hands call, because that's the type of feedback we need if we have to adjust something," says Campa. "There are a lot of good people trying to do the right thing for our folks serving out here. Sometimes we get it right; sometimes we don't."

He understands the concern among sailors. But, Campa adds, "What we don't want to happen is to force the sailor to take an exam in an environment that is not conducive to doing so. I feel it is up to each and every one of you to make sure that happens."

Another hot issue is the operational demands on corpsmen and anecdotal evidence, at least here at Camp TQ, that retention rates are beginning to suffer. One chief tells Campa of a corpsman who has only been in the Navy long enough to make third class petty officer.

Already he has been exposed to five roadside bomb attacks.

"The doc said, 'No more. You're not going outside the wire,' " the chief tells Campa.

Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it turns out, have created some dissonance with the corpsman rating between those who support Marines (the "green side") and those assigned to ship or to shore-based hospitals and clinics (the "blue side").

Corpsmen trained for the green side are seeing their medical skills tested daily treating trauma wounds from sniper bullets, rocket-propelled grenades, and roadside bombs, known here as IEDs or improvised explosive devices. They face the same sort of personal dangers themselves, embedded as they are with Marines on patrol or in convoys. The pace of operations is so high for Marine units that combat-trained corpsmen find themselves serving multiple tours in war zones.

Meanwhile, blue-side corpsmen who expected to spend their enlistment or even full careers rotating between sea duty and hospitals ashore also are being sent to Iraq into combat support units. They are immersed in operating environments and seeing injuries unlike anything imagined aboard ship. Not all of them want to be here.

One chief explains to Campa that corpsmen due to rotate off sea duty are asking for another ship assignment rather than a hospital where they risk being tapped for an IA assignment to Iraq. Corpsmen with ground combat experience also are beginning to regret tours to stateside clinics or hospitals. Facility commanders, they believe, are inclined to pick them as IA designees rather than lose staff more critical to the hospital because, for example, they operate X-ray machines or other medical equipment critical to the facility. Some former combat corpsmen are deciding they would have been better off staying with their Marines when the unit rotates back to the states.

"You go to the blue side ... and suddenly you find yourself deployable again as IA," explains Senior Chief Hospital Corpsman Ed Santa Maria after the meeting with Campa. "Now the question on these kids' minds is: Why should I bother transferring to a hospital when I could stay here on the green side and be with my own unit that I worked so well with. ... Staying with the green side, instead of rotating, also allows you to be able to decompress [when] that whole unit decompresses ... instead of moving to a new assignment and decompressing by yourself."

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 05, 2007

It's Just Standard Operating Procedure

Dec. 22, Afternoon

The VIP Lounge at Camp TQ

Walking to the mess hall, I catch up with Chief Hospital Corpsman Nick Castaneda with 1st Marine Logistics Force (Forward).

It was Castaneda who told Campa about the young HM who has been exposed to five attacks on his convoys. The most recent one involved a mine beneath his vehicle.

"He received a fractured nose, concussion. This one didn't kill anybody. But the recovery vehicle that went to assist, they got three KIA on the same route. So what they do daily here is dangerous."

He says a total of 60 corpsmen are embedded with the battalion to support 900 to 1000 Marines. Of those, 13 are individual augmentees, there to fill gaps and ensure medical readiness. Most didn't have any combat experience before they got here.

"They have to get in the groove right away," says Castaneda. "They go from a quiet environment to no-nonsense operational tempo. ... Infantry units are unique. To maintain that mental readiness takes a lot out of an individual. The average individual cannot do this."

Of his 60 corpsmen, I ask Castaneda, how many have been exposed to an IED attack.

"Oh, gosh," he says, hesitating as though counting. Then he says, "All but two." And all 60, he says, have been exposed to small arms fire and probably rocket-propelled grenades.

"You get to the point where an RPG goes over your head or hits your vehicle and you say, 'Okay, didn't detonate. Good to go.' It's daily activity, sir. It's SOP. They go out there in harm's way."

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 06, 2007

Why the Navy Exists

Dec. 22, 1 p.m.

During lunch in the Camp TQ mess hall, Senior Chief Hospital Corpsman Donald W. Clark Jr., operations chief for the TQ Surgical, a level II medical treatment facility here, says body armor is saving a lot of lives, but so too is the quick work of Navy corpsmen on the scene of attacks with wounded Marines.

"The corpsmen on the line when the incidents happen are packaging the patients incredibly well. They are putting the tourniquets on quickly. They are saving lives at the site so by the time they get to us we can stabilize them. If they come into us alive, we have about a 98 percent success rate of survival," says Clark.

Personal protection devices are evolving. Fire retardant gloves are holding down burn injuries. Better armor encircling the torso reduces fatal chest wounds.

"But what's happening is the insurgency is reacting to our strategy, and we've seen a lot of sniper activity. They are hitting people with neck shots, head shots. We had one the other day, he got shot right here," pointing to his upper chest, "and the flak vest stopped it. When they brought him in we thought he was through and through, but we started checking him and there was no exit wound. The entrance wound was consistent with a bad cut. Pretty amazing."

Clark, a naval reservist, volunteered for this tour in Iraq. The work performed by the medical staff here, he says, "is amazing."

"I mean the kinetic energy of an IED, the explosion, the burns. Yet this staff puts our guys together when you'd think, 'Oh gosh, they're gone.' They aren't giving up on them. It's very aggressive trauma surgery."

About 70 percent of corpsmen working TQ Surgical are individual augmentees, says Senior Chief HM Emmanuel Evangelista.

And their morale?

"Pretty high, actually," he says.

Chief Hospital Corpsman Nick Castaneda, sitting across the lunch table, adds however that "a select few" IAs "don't want to be here. Well, no one wants to be here. But they voice it more than my average sailor, and it affects the morale of their peer group."

Mullen's entourage is driven to Camp TQ's main-side chapel for the all-hands call. Sandbags guard this and other one-story structures nearby. From time to time, we are told, a mortar round will hit somewhere in the camp. Mullen stands with Campa in front of a pair of Christmas wreaths. The CNO describes these times as the most challenging for U.S. forces of his career.

"This fight will be on for a long time," he says, noting that 13,000 sailors are serving on the ground somewhere within Central Command. He acknowledges "rumors" of a build-up of naval ships in the Gulf, with news reports linking it to the president's expected announcement of a new strategy for Iraq. "But nothing is definite," Mullen says.

Any decision to expand the size of the Army and Marine Corps, he says, is bound to affect all services. The Navy has hundreds of sailors in Djibouti and on the president's desk, he says, is a proposal to establish an African command.

"So I think we will be in and out of [this region] more than we have been in the past," Mullen says.

A sailor asks about offering bonuses for combat corpsman. Both Campa and Mullen explain that Selective Reenlistment Bonuses are tied to requirements. They aren't offered unless rates become

undermanned. In other words, if more than enough quality corpsmen want to continue to serve, SRBs won't be needed.

The services, Mullen predicts, will be moving more toward "incentive-based" compensation.

When another sailor complains that his shore tour was cut short prematurely for this IA assignment in Iraq, Mullen recounts the guidelines he set to ensure that doesn't happen. In this case, the guidelines weren't followed, the sailor suggests.

"I really fixed that well," says the CNO with sarcasm.

"Yes, sir."

"I will fix it quickly this time," Mullen promises.

Campa fields a complaint that a string of arduous tours, particularly in wartime, can leave some of the best enlisted leaders without time to complete even a two-year associate's degree. Yet it's required for advancement to E-8.

"I think we need to continue to look at that ... I don't want to leave any strong deckplate leader behind," he says.

To a question on the declining size of the Navy, a drop of 40,000 sailors in four years, Mullen says it soon will be "leveling off."

And despite the increase over two years in the number of sailors serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, he says, "We are a war-fighting, seagoing service." It's why the Navy exists, Mullen adds, "and that's what will make us great in the future."

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 07, 2007

In the Chapel of Hope

Mid-afternoon on Dec. 22, we board an Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter for a 15-minute flight into Camp Fallujah. Two flight crew members man .50 machine guns poking out both sides of the aircraft. A ground convoy would be unnecessarily dangerous through Anbar province. Yet it is a ride that scores of Marines on patrol, Navy corpsmen, and explosive ordnance teams make daily.

Before meeting with sailors at Camp Fallujah, Mullen's entourage tours the hospital. Mullen is invited to watch part of a surgery in progress. The doctor is a 59-year-old Navy reservist, Capt. Saleem Khan. He also is officer in charge of the hospital.

In a hallway interview, Khan, soft-spoken and wearing glasses and surgery scubs, explains his accent. He was raised in Pakistan. He can read Arabic and speak Persian. His mother was an Afghan. He says he maintains a medical practice in Sherman, Texas. But he also has been a reservist for 18 years. This is his fifth deployment, his fourth to Iraq. He is a volunteer.

Is it even possible to maintain a thriving practice stateside if he spends so much time deployed?

“Oh, yeah,” says Khan, smiling. “I’m a Texan.”

No, seriously. How does he sustain it?

“You have to have faith,” he says.

“So you just go back, hang up your shingle and the word spreads?”

“Absolutely,” he says. “Forty-eight hours. That’s all I need.”

Though his specialty is thoracic surgery, in Fallujah Khan more often is a general surgeon doing trauma and critical care.

How would he characterize this experience?

“Wonderful,” he says. “Sometimes we see a whole lot and sometimes maybe nothing. It’s unpredictable.”

Khan got his medical degree in Tucson, Ariz., trained as a thoracic surgeon in Dallas, and studied trauma and critical care in Detroit. Why join the Navy in his early 40s?

“I never wanted anybody to look at me and say, ‘Hey, you came over here and made a lot of money and you didn’t pay your dues. My kids were born in the United States. I want them to know their father paid his dues.”

The hospital is unattractive, with hallways dimly lit and in need of both brighter paint and at least some pictures on its bare walls. But Khan he and his staff have everything they need.

“This is very deceptive,” he says, guessing at my first impression. “We can do chest cases over here. We can do vascular cases. I mean, it doesn’t look like a hallowed hospital atmosphere, but it’s very functional. We do a lot more injured and sick patients over here than even the big hospitals back home.”

Looking down, I see his gray running shoes are soiled with blood. He might do two or three surgeries one day, four or five the next. He

explains that his last patient had been shot in the pelvis. It was his most difficult operation this day.

“Got all the bleeders tied up,” he says. “Had a big hole in the bladder.”

“A Marine?”

“No,” Khan says, “an insurgent. But over here we treat all patients with the same respect and the same care as we would anyone else.”

Mullen’s staff signals me it’s time to move out.

I shake Khan’s hand.

“I’m a Moslem. I want you to know that,” he says. “I think the Moslem perspective.”

I ask why he feels it’s necessary to make that known.

“If I don’t, then I would be letting down my comrades,” Khan says. “I don’t want anybody to ever say there was any discrimination in the service. Maybe there is, but I don’t see it,” says Khan. “It’s a great outfit.”

The CNO and his staff have left for next all hands call.

Khan escorts me outside and points me toward where Mullen will be speaking.

“They’re in the Chapel of Hope,” he says.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 08, 2007

Go Big or Go Home

December 22

Outside the Chapel of Hope at Camp Fallujah, Marine Brig. Gen. Robert B. Neller, deputy commanding general for operations among Multi-National Forces-West, briefly discusses progress in building relationships with local leaders. He says Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was perceived as a strong leader by Iraqis, and so there is unease among Iraqi politicians over his resignation.

At the all-hands call, Mullen and Camp answer familiar questions on the timing and frequency of IA deployments. There's interest here in whether bonuses and special pays for combat assignments might be improved. The CNO notes "significant" gains in pays and benefits overall over the last decade. He says he does not support lowering the age at which retired reservists begin to receive their annuities, from 60 down to 55. It's too expensive, Mullen says.

Following questions, the crowd stays to see Mullen reenlist a master chief. Mullen takes time then to pose with individual sailors who want photographs of themselves with the CNO to send home. Word spreads among Mullen's entourage that because the schedule has fallen behind, and Army helicopters don't like to fly at dusk given the disorienting light, we likely will be delayed in leaving for Baghdad.

In a conversation with our driver, a young Marine, I ask about a general perception among troops in Fallujah regarding President George W. Bush's promise of a new strategy for Iraq. Can the mission succeed?

"Go big or go home, sir."

That, he suggests, is how a lot of young Marines feel. He goes on to express confidence that there isn't a challenge inside Iraq that Marines,

in sufficient strength, couldn't solve.

After an hour's wait, we learn that the Marines have found helicopters to take us into Baghdad. By the time we reach the airfield, dusk has turned to night. I'm surprised when our small convoy of vehicles turns off all headlights as we serpentine through final barriers near the field. But the choppers, CH-46 Sea Knights, land with no lights, their pilots wearing night-vision goggles. A helmeted crewman emerges 50 yards from us, swinging a penlight to show his approach. We follow him back and board the aircraft, our third helicopter today. We were on *USS Boxer* this morning, but it feels like last week.

Traveling toward Baghdad in a darkened helicopter, it's not hard to believe reports of severe electrical shortages throughout Iraq. Though Baghdad is a city of about 7 million, the wattage seen on the ground, in early evening, is spread out and comparable to a dimmed-down small town in America.

The lack of security, the lack of services, the fact that we have to fly into Iraq's capitol stealthily, nearly four years into a long and costly occupation, dampens one's optimism.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 09, 2007

In Hussein's Palace

Evening, Dec. 22

From the darkened airfield at Camp Victory, Mullen and staff move to waiting SUVs. His sixth all hands call of this trip is to be held at Saddam's former Al Faw Palace, a vast and beautiful structure built of marble. U.S. forces have renamed it the Joint Visitors' Bureau but the opulence survives. Several hundred sailors fill a high-ceilinged conference room.

Perhaps 40 sit at the oversized and elegant conference table that any corporation would have trouble explaining to shareholders. Others stand behind them, three and four deep, as Mullen explains the reasons behind his holiday visit.

"You're making a huge difference over here," he tells them.

Most sailors here are individual augmentees (IAs), the latest wave of more than 46,000 the Navy has cut orders for since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Mullen explains. Some of the IAs here still want to understand why they had only days to get their lives in order before shipping out.

One of them is Lt. Cmdr. James Mason who tells the CNO his original

IA orders gave him only four days notice to prepare for an assignment to Baghdad where he would coordinate dignitary visits. At the time those orders were cut, in March of 2006, Mason, a helicopter pilot, was assigned to the Naval Safety Center in Norfolk, Va.

“I thought, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ ” Mason remembers, when asked for his reaction to the orders when we meet following the all hands call. Mason says he had spent the previous year in a shore assignment, as an admiral’s aide. Before that, however, he had back-to-back sea tours and he will return to sea again as a department head following his tour in Baghdad.

But Mason says the safety center commander, Rear Adm. George E. Mayer, intervened on his behalf, complaining to the Bureau of Personnel, “We can’t do this to our people.” As a result, the four-day notice was stretched to six weeks. Mason wanted to be sure I knew that because he didn’t have a chance to explain those details to CNO before the open session with sailors moved to another topic.

Mullen, after posing for more photos, left for dinner with Army Gen. George Casey, commander of coalition forces in Iraq. The rest of his entourage took a small bus to the Camp Victory chow hall. Armed soldiers at the door checked identification cards carefully and even required that I retrieve my invitational travel orders from the bus. Even inside Camp Victory, it’s still Baghdad where security risks abound.

After dinner we settle into what can only be described as a palatial bunkroom in the camp’s Joint Visitors Bureau. The building is another of Saddam’s former palaces. There one, however, is where the dictator’s sons Uday and Qusay entertained friends and reportedly raped young women whom they selected at random, based on their appearance, off the streets of Baghdad.

Floors are marble, light fixtures are candelabras, ceiling are 20-feet high, toilets are fine porcelain and there is a king size bed across the

room from our bunks on which we drop our armored vests and helmets. The Hussein boys, we're pretty sure, won't mind.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2007

One Bomb At A Time

Dec. 23, 7 a.m.

On receiving timely intelligence of a champion snorer among Admiral Mullen's travel staff, I held on to the earplugs from our helicopter ride and was rewarded with a good night's sleep.

The bathroom off the bunkroom is spacious and clean. Cases of bottled water are stacked beside the sink because, even in a palace, Baghdad tap water isn't safe for drinking by visiting Westerners.

After an American breakfast in one of the palace's chandeliered dining rooms, our entourage returns by convoy to Al Faw Palace, where Mullen receives a classified briefing on progress being made against the IED threat in Iraq.

Mullen's interest in the topic is keen, not only because roadside bombs remain the No. 1 killer of Americans here, but also because, at Mullen's initiative, the Navy's role in fighting remotely-detonated IEDs has been expanded sharply since his last visit to Baghdad in December 2005.

During that trip, Mullen learned that ground convoys equipped with CREW [Counter Radio-controlled IED Electronic Warfare] systems, to block electronically detonated bombs, were also blocking routine communications gear. Thus for soldiers or Marines to talk to their base, or even to another vehicle, they had to turn off the very equipment needed to interfere with remotely-detonated IEDs as their convoys passed.

After learning of the problem and consulting separately with a trio of Navy electronic warfare experts in theater, Mullen sent an e-mail in January 2006 to Army Gen. George Casey, then commander of multi-

national forces in Iraq, saying that Navy EW skills could be used effectively against electronically-triggered IEDs.

U.S. Central Command soon thereafter officially solicited the Navy's help. By May, 290 Navy personnel had arrived in Iraq to form a new unit, the Joint CREW Composite Squadron-One [JCCS-1]. Its members, led by electronic warfare officers, were reassigned throughout Iraq to embed with battalions up through divisions and given responsibility for installing and maintaining CREW systems on U.S. ground convoys and for training convoy soldiers and Marines on the equipment to avoid interoperability problems with other communications gear.

Before JCCS-1, explains Navy Lt. Scott Oliver, an electronic counter-measures officer from EA-6B Prowler community, soldiers in vehicles equipped with CREW systems here in Iraq "had very little understanding on how it worked [or] the electromagnetic spectrum. …Nobody could talk to each other, because pretty much nobody had carefully looked at the spectrum and looked at the threat and figured out we need to jam these specific threats and not jam the communications."

Mullen tells me later that it was just logical for the Navy to begin playing a greater role to counter the IED threat.

"I mean we grow up in the Navy learning about a very challenging electronic environment that is out here. You have nothing but radios, communication gear, electronic gear." At sea, "it gets into your blood pretty fast, because it can cost you your life not understanding the electronic environment."

"Our efforts have saved lives," Oliver says. "I know that because I've had guys come back and tell me about scenarios where they actually found [roadside bombs before detonation] and they know the CREW is working."

While Mullen receives his classified briefing on JCCS-1 and other counter-IED efforts, I have time to sit down in the Al Faw domed foyer with Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Justin Hamaker, who works the IED problem one bomb at a time. He is an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team leader with EOD Mobile Unit 8 out of Naval Air Station Sigonella, Sicily. Twenty sailors from Unit 8 are on a six-month assignment to support the Army's 79th Ordnance Battalion by disarming bombs.

When soldiers on patrol find weapons caches and convoys come across IED threats, an EOD team is called. Hamaker's three-man team is on call 12 hours a day.

Despite the efforts of JCCS-1 and of an entire allied task force spending billions on the IED threat, IEDs remain the deadliest weapons used by insurgents. The number of IEDs found by coalition forces has doubled in the past year. In December, roadside bombs will kill 74 U.S. service members, the highest monthly total since IEDs first began to appear along Iraqi roadways in July 2003.

Hamaker's three-man team clears a route that run from Taji, 20 miles north of Baghdad, through the capital and as far south as Mahmudiya. Since early September, when Hamaker's unit first arrived in Iraq, IEDs have killed almost 200 Americans, most of them soldiers and Marines. But in the past year IEDs also have killed nine sailors in Iraq, including four EOD technicians.

Hamaker's team hasn't suffered any casualties, but there have been close calls, he says. His convoys have been hit by IEDs and by rocket-propelled grenades and get hit with small arms fire "pretty regularly," Hamaker explains.

"The most dangerous part" of his job, he says, "is just getting to wherever we're going."

As the interview concludes, as if on cue, Cmdr. John Kirby, Mullen's public affairs officer, explains that bad weather will prevent us from traveling by helicopter that afternoon to the Green Zone as planned. Instead, he says, we'll go in a convoy of armored Humvees.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2007

Traveling "Route Irish"

Late morning, Dec. 23

Wearing armor vests, carrying helmets, we congregate in the lobby of the Joint Visitor's Bureau to await a convoy of armored Humvees. They will take us from Camp Victory to the U.S. Embassy Annex in the Green Zone, where Mullen will lunch with the head of the Iraqi Navy and later meet with a few hundred more U.S. sailors assigned to the embassy or Iraqi ministries.

Waiting, I have my first chance since the trip began to ask Admiral Mullen his thoughts on what he has heard from his sailors. Fresh from a briefing with Navy personnel addressing the threat posed to ground forces from electronically-detonated IEDs, Mullen says these officers and sailors are saving lives while they gain "a totally different view of joint warfare." The experience, he says, will "change their view forever."

We talk about the overall number of sailors on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan and the pressure that this puts on the fleet. Mullen concedes he gets reminded from time to time, including by Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Joe Campa, that the Navy's "real strength" is still at sea. Yet Mullen is ready to put even more sailors in ground combat support roles.

"I think I can take more risk, that is, continue to pull from active and reserve to support these missions," he says.

I recall for Mullen that he didn't sound sympathetic aboard *Anzio* when the commanding officer noted how he was down four experienced petty officers because of IA assignments ashore.

“Yes, that’s the tension. I’ve been a CO,” says Mullen. “Then again, I try to tell them who they are dealing with, because I have never been on a ship that was 100 percent manned.”

And Mullen tell them he wants their “good people” filling IA billets ashore, not just the first new sailor “to show up on the quarterdeck” or their worst performer.
“They don’t like to give up their best people. I understand that,” Mullen says. “I just want them to understand the guidance is coming from the top … to provide terrific people.”

“Take four terrific people off a small cruiser,” I say, “and that has an impact.”

“If I took four terrific people off [a new Littoral Combat Ship] I’d be a lot more concerned. That’s 10 percent of the crew. … So, I’m listening to [the cruiser CO] but he’s not making me change my mind.”

The most worrisome feedback Mullen has had this trip, he says, is from Navy people who don’t feel they are doing “meaningful work” ashore because of a poor match between their skills and the job.

“Some of them are telling me that sitting behind a desk producing power point slides is not what they anticipated,” Mullen says. Central Command has heard those complaints, he adds, and is working hard to better match Navy ranks and skills to command needs.

We turn from our conversation to see that a soldier in full “battle rattle” is advising the rest of our party on security precautions for the convoy into the Green Zone.

“…Best thing, like I said, is if something were to happen just listen to what my people tell you to do. Just go with it,” says the soldier. “We turn into grunts inside the Humvees so…"

“Wouldn’t want you to be anything else,” says Mullen.

“Yes sir,” the soldier laughs. “Anyone have any questions?”

The weight and thickness of the Humvee’s door confirms that it is armored. I sit in the right rear seat behind a young officer riding shotgun. I decide to carefully prop my feet off the floor on a slender ledge behind his seat. We will travel to the Green Zone on what the U.S. military calls “Route Irish,” a 5-mile stretch that we pick up outside of camp not far from the airport. At one time this was the most deadly road in Iraq. It is well secured these days and attacks are infrequent, facts I didn’t learn until later this day.

My view out the front windshield is of a rainy, deserted highway except for the Humvees we’re following. A sign on the rear of each warns, in English and Arabic, of “extreme danger.” To my left are the legs of our gunner, who mans the vehicle's .50 caliber machine gun from inside an armored turret. We’ve been advised that these Humvees won’t be traveling faster than 40 miles per hour because, if they need to swerve, the same turret that protects the gunner makes the vehicle top heavy and vulnerable to flipping.

Out the thick glass on my right is a grim ribbon of land that runs along the highway, largely denuded of all vegetation and all livable buildings from which insurgents might attack. Our three-man crew is vigilant. Following procedure, the soldier riding shotgun hollers up to the

gunner as we approach any overpass. The driver begins gently to serpentine between traffic lanes, I assume to make targeting from the overpass, by rifle or grenade launcher, more difficult. Our soldiers, National Guardsmen, are sticking to their safety routines, which to a first-time passenger are both reassuring and alarming. As to our soldiers, God bless ‘em.

That’s what I’m thinking.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2007

Christmas Eve in Afghanistan

Christmas Eve, 2006

Before we leave Baghdad to spend Christmas in Afghanistan, I am able to sit down separately with CNO Mullen and Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Joe Campa to discuss issues sailors have raised during our visit.

Both men acknowledge that a majority of sailors serving in Iraq as individual augmentees (IAs) are not volunteers. Some clearly are disappointed to be deployed in this way. But Mullen says the feedback he gets is that “the vast majority of them are excited about being here and making a difference.”
Trips such as this, he adds, help him and Campa to understand what IA policies are working and what needs to be adjusted.

A year ago, for example, Navy corpsmen were being redeployed after less than a year home with families. That no longer is permitted. Yet Mullen has learned this trip that his year-at-home policy is not being followed rigorously. “We clearly are rotating some earlier than that, so I will go back and get a very strict accounting on what have we really done here,” he says.

He has learned too that support networks for the families of IA sailors, active or reserve, are weak. Mullen agrees with a junior officer who remarked that too many sailors being assigned to Iraq lack “situational awareness” before they arrive in country.

“Whether it’s GITMO or Iraq or Djibouti, there is great uncertainty because we just haven’t done it before,” Mullen agrees. “So how do we fill that gap in for the individual? And that’s amplified even more for the family.”

Of the IA program, says Campa, “We’ve taken that talent, moved it to

shore and we have to learn to manage that."

Part of that management challenge is ensuring sailors at sea that what they do daily there is no less important today than it ever has been.

"That's our strength to our country," says Campa. "I feel we have to watch that."
It's a concern raised during ship visits in the chiefs' mess.

"I get a little feedback from senior enlisted -- no alarm bells or anything like that, but – 'Hey, I'm got sailors working just as hard out here. Let's be mindful.' I know that, so I am mindful of it."

Yet ship crews also are proud of shipmates in IA assignments, he says. Campa saw that firsthand recently while visiting ships in Pearl Harbor. Photographs of absent IA sailors, wearing helmets and armored vests in Iraq and Afghanistan, were displayed on quarterdecks. The ships send packages of goodies to IA shipmates. These feelings in turn create more volunteers.

"Sailors have a sense of adventure, and so a lot of them are compelled to raise their hands and say, 'I want to experience some of that,' " he says.

The Navy is also abuzz about IAs, Campa says, "because a lot of commands have been touched by it. It's not uncommon to know someone who has gone out on an IA, and you don't know if you will be next."

The uncertainty needs to be eased by improvements in the selection and notification process for IA assignments and by working with the Army to better match needs on the ground with Navy rates and ranks, Campa says. Navy chiefs, for example, shouldn't be tapped to do E-5 jobs. Chiefs, he adds, are all leaders. The Army sometimes doesn't understand that.

“Our chiefs’ mess (sailors E-7 through E-9) is a very flat organization. When we come together as chiefs, every voice is equal. We work for the collective good of that ship. We don’t have a real strong hierarchy in there.”

That isn’t true of Army senior enlisted grades, Campa says. Navy chiefs sent to ground support units can experience some culture clash.

We depart Iraq mid-morning aboard two Air Force C-12 aircraft, corkscrewing upward in a tight funnel of air space above Baghdad airport, the way aircraft used to leave West Berlin during the Cold War.

At Ali Al Salem airport in Kuwait, we drop off our armor and transfer bags to the Navy C-20 executive jet that brought us into Bahrain three days earlier. The flight into Afghanistan normally would take four hours, but weather puts us behind. We don’t close on Bagram air base until well after dark in a snowstorm.
Our pilots take the aircraft down low enough to see if they can spot runway lights, They can but not in time to land. In the passenger cabin we hear engines throttle up again. We will circle one more time and attempt to land. If that’s not possible, fuel is enough of a concern that our aircraft will have to divert to an airport outside of Afghanistan.

It’s Christmas Eve, but no one, I suspect, is associating the storm now with traditional holiday cheer. The cockpit crew turns on an outside camera, located behind the aircraft’s front wheels. We now can track the plane’s approach on our own movie monitors. Out of darkness runway lights appear and, within moments, we see and feel our wheels touch down.

Mullen later describes the maneuver as a “varsity landing.”

We transfer with bags to waiting SUVs as the snow continues to fall. We arrive hours late to what was to be a dinner and Christmas party hosted by VAQ-142, a squadron of Navy EA-6B electronic warfare aircraft out of Whidbey Island, Wash. Food, drinks, and perhaps some

holiday spirit are gone by the time we step inside a dimly lit repair facility with its sparse holiday decorations. We just find a group of tired pilots, naval flight officers and aircraft maintainers waiting to share a few moments with their CNO. Mullen wishes them a Merry Christmas and says they'll meet again at tomorrow's all-hands call.

An Army National Guard sergeant takes part of Mullen's entourage to a second floor bunk room of a nondescript building. He couldn't find pillows or pillow cases, he says, no hint of regret in his voice. The bathroom is a trailer outside. He'll see us in the morning.

 We look around at the soiled mattresses and toss sheets over the best of the lot. Our palace days are over. But it's not a bed of straw either.